

Panel Title: *Ethnographies of Public Religion*

Participants: Kimberly Blake (Miami University) (presenter); Daniel McClurkin (Miami University) (presenter); Seth Boda (Miami University) (presenter); James S. Bielo (Miami University) (moderator)

Panel Abstract: What is the fate of religion in the modern world? From Max Weber to contemporary debates about religion in the public sphere, this question has proven vexing for modern anthropology. The strict claim that modernity would usher in an age of rationalistic secularity, in which religion's importance in public life would fade to negligible influence, is now doubted by most scholars of contemporary religion. Thinkers as diverse as Charles Taylor, Jose Casanova, and Talal Asad have argued that secularism exists more as an immanent frame, differentiated from the field of religion, producing its own structures and subjectivities. Alongside this kind of presence, even the most overtly secular states increasingly contend with the renewed social, political, economic, and moral impacts of religion on public life. Taken together, long-held assumptions about the place of religion in contemporary life are being significantly rethought. In this panel, three undergraduate anthropologists draw from original ethnographic fieldwork in three cultural contexts to address matters of public religion in the contemporary world. Kimberly Blake analyzes how public history is constructed, performed, and taught at a sacred site of Mormon pilgrimage/tourism in Ohio. Daniel McClurkin examines how an unexpected religious minority, Bahá'í, works to establish a public presence in the divisive social context of Catholic-Protestant Northern Ireland. And, Seth Boda asks how the secularizing patterns of modern Japan are negotiated in a rural Buddhist school. Together, these ethnographies of public religion explore processes of constructing identity, place, and memory in contexts of religious pluralism and contested social belonging.

Length of session: 90 minutes

Keywords: religion, public sphere, pluralism

Session Introduction (James S. Bielo)

Sharing the Sacred: A Tradition of Mormon Public Education in Kirtland, Ohio (Kimberly Blake)

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS) has a strong tradition of promoting formal education. This includes several initiatives detailing, preserving, and sharing church history at sites of significance, setting these sites apart as sacred space. In summer 2015 I conducted eight weeks of ethnographic fieldwork at the Kirtland Historic Village, a recreated 19th century town in northeast Ohio. Historic Kirtland's status as a sacred LDS space, coupled with its high operating costs and low non-LDS visitor attendance, raises the question of why the site stays open to the general public and free of admission. The use of historical material at the site and its narrative interpretation by sister missionaries reveal LDS investment in this local community. Material culture and stories are used to perform a consistent narrative about a wealthy patriarch that transformed a rural town into a thriving small city. The Kirtland Historic Village illustrates a fundamental social fact about the religious life of Mormons: reliving the past through present actions.

Keywords: United States, Mormonism, public history, sacred space

“Are You a Catholic Bahá’í or a Protestant Bahá’í?”: Articulations of Faith in Post-Troubles Belfast
(Daniel McClurkin)

Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland approved “The Good Friday Agreement” in 1998, officially ending the Troubles, a time of heightened violence between Republican and Loyalist factions in Northern Ireland. However, to say Northern Ireland is “Post-Troubles” is misleading; tensions remain incredibly high and everyday distrust between the factions persists. Along with dividing the country politically, the Troubles fomented Catholic-Protestant division and religious belief became inseparable from political affiliation. This continues in contemporary Northern Ireland, as Catholicism indexes Republicanism and Protestantism indexes Loyalism. In turn, the political commitments of non-Christians are forced into this dualist structure; they must either be Catholic/Republican or Protestant/Loyalist. This paper, based on nine weeks of ethnographic fieldwork in Belfast in summer 2015, explores the ways in which Belfast Bahá’ís articulate their “Irishness.” With a particular interest in conversion narratives, community center programs, and Bahá’í Devotionals, this paper follows public and private expressions of faith, exploring Bahá’í strategies for overcoming Northern Ireland’s tense religious/political climate.

Keywords: Northern Ireland, religious pluralism, religion and politics

Religiosity in Japan: Negotiating a Secularizing World (Seth Boda, Miami University)

During summer 2014 I conducted nine weeks of ethnographic fieldwork with a Buddhist preschool in northern Japan. This paper explores the ways in which modern Japanese individuals and religious institutions negotiate an increasingly secularizing society. Buddhist and Shinto rituals and places maintain a visible public presence in Japan, yet the country is one of the world’s most secular states. Japanese religions, particularly in rural regions, bare the burden of demonstrating their relevance to an urbanized, global, and pluralistic Japan. One example is the environmental activism mobilized by Buddhists following the Fukushima nuclear disaster. The teachers at the preschool where I conducted field work maintained a garden plot. Classes of students took turns tending the land, eventually consuming their hard work in the form of delicious lunches prepared by the kitchen staff with local produce. Strategies such as religiously-inflected environmentalism have produced Japanese citizens who participate heavily in the religious and cultural heritage of their nation while simultaneously identifying as non-religious and maintaining low levels of local temple involvement.

Keywords: Japan, Buddhism, secularity, environmentalism

Discussion